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ABSTRACT

Business/vocational education has the unique opportunity to introduce multicultural education from the perspective of world trade, business, economics, and comparative advantage. Vocational educators also have a responsibility to foster respect for the human rights of all people and oppose current and historical practices such as oppression, prejudice, and violent acts. Multicultural education is based on democracy and pluralism and requires teachers to use a variety of teaching styles that are consistent with a wide range of learning styles. A research study summarizing more than 91 studies, reports, and papers indicates that the only programs likely to improve cross-group relations are in-depth, long-term programs that are infused into the curriculum early and continued throughout high school. Among those approaches/activities that are especially important in improving intergroup relations and ending prejudicial thinking are cooperative learning, critical thinking skills development, self-esteem building, and employability skills training. (Fourteen specific suggestions for business/vocational teachers are included.) (MN)

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CULTURAL DIVERSITY & BUSINESS/VOCATIONAL EDUCATION: A Question of Human Rights & Cultural Contradiction

by

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Business education has the unique opportunity to introduce multicultural education from the perspective of world trade, business, economics, and comparative advantage. We also have a responsibility to foster respect for the human rights of all people and bring to the front current and historical practices such as oppression, prejudice, and violent acts which are part of the past and the present but which should be exposed for what they are and not glamorized.

As the United States acquires a more culturally diverse population, white Americans, in schools, the community, and the workplace, must adjust to a less dominant and more balanced role in a pluralistic nation. Unfortunately, as our population becomes more diverse we have witnessed an increase in racism and racial violence. Business educators must join hands with all educators, business people, community leaders and others to address these problems openly and frequently in each and every class -- K-12 and at the college and university level.

Our future belongs to those who are able to walk and work beside people of many different cultures, lifestyles, and perspectives. To do this will not be easy. The United States developed, grew, and prospered during the past 200 plus years by exploiting and violating the human and economic rights of the American Indian, African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and, to some extent women. The white American male has used force, passed laws, and ravaged the environment in his quest for dominance, control, and economic superiority. In the 1990's, however, the white-European-male oriented corporate culture doesn't work well with a demographically diverse workforce.

Just maybe the excessively repressive dominant way of conducting business, government, the military, and international affairs has peaked. Our society and world are out of sync. We have been operating in a paradigm where decisions were made primarily on the basis that science and technology would solve our most serious personal, economic and social problems. It has not worked in the United States or around the world. The world needs to seek new answers to different questions.

We need a broad vision of the total interaction of all of life's creatures -- big and small. We need to look at the world as "spaceship earth" and value other cultures and creatures for the diversity they bring.

Vocational educators can take a lesson from corporate America about how to begin to break down prejudice and misunderstanding between people of different races and culture. The first step is in promoting open dialogue. We must get people talking to each other in a non-threatening environment. Diversity issues must be addressed and people must encounter and look at their own prejudices.

We must actively engage diversity by making others aware of it. Diversity can bring together multiple perspectives for problem solving. Diversity can enhance creativity if people are aware of their differences and capitalize on them. Understanding differences can give the United States a competitive edge because in a global environment our customers have changed. Previously white males designed products and made sales calls to other white males. Today the customer and/or the sales person is likely to be any ethnic or racial group, man or woman.

I recently attended a workshop entitled, "The Lack of Cultural/Ethnic Diversity in Education," presented by Judge Ida Leggett, the first and only black woman judge in Idaho. She openly addressed the fact that educators in this country are still mostly white, and middle-class people who don't understand the problems and are very slow to admit and address the fact that racial problems and oppression exist. Leggett refers to educators, particularly administrators, as "blue-eyed Bob." It is probably appropriate that we add "blue-eyed Becky."

Judge Leggett believes that people of all races and colors can live together in harmony and can all learn valuable lessons from each other. We are all part of a world community and we must appreciate people from other cultures who speak other languages.

Exclusion and isolationism breeds mistrust, misunderstanding, and insecurity. Those who are excluded feel inferior which in time results in the self-fulfilling prophecy that people of color are stupid, lazy, unmotivated. Most African Americans in this country at least speak the language. The problems are much greater for children and youth who do not have a good command of the English language.

Hispanics are rapidly becoming the dominant minority group in the United States. A student who attends school in an anglo-oriented school and returns to an Hispanic oriented home is often very confused. The values learned at school and the values of the home are very different. The student is torn. How can he or she accept the values of the teachers without disloyalty to the family. Teachers must understand, address, and discuss these differences with the students and provide them with a wholesome but not necessarily identical environment for learning and growing. The task is no longer to treat all students the same in an attempt to mold them into a monolithic culture.

Educators must transform the curriculum as a whole to affirm diversity and honor multiple perspectives. Teachers need to present positive images of ethnic groups to counteract the negative ones prevalent in society. Teachers must focus on the difference between characteristics of groups and the behavior of individuals. There may be some value to describing global characteristics of ethnic groups, we must emphasize that class, gender, region, and religion all influence individuals. Educators must walk a fine line between generalizing and stereotyping. Do not allow racial, ethnic, or sexist jokes or slurs to be told by students or adults. Let everyone know that is not acceptable behavior.

Multicultural education requires teachers to use a variety of teaching styles that are consistent with a wide range of learning styles. Some cultures condition students to approach learning holistically rather than in small parts. Traditionally schools tend to emphasize breaking knowledge into parts (analysis) over seeing the relationship among parts (synthesis). Unless teachers modify their teaching strategies and classroom environment, changes to the curriculum will not ensure success for all students. Teachers must be willing to share their power and allow students input into decisions. We must emphasize that "what is true" is always open to challenge. We do not have to sanction all cultural practices but we do need to examine them. Without sensitivity to culture our judgments can be ethnocentric.

Multicultural education is charged with uniting a deeply divided society. The goal is to create authentic unity. Multicultural education is the only kind of education that is democratic and pluralistic. The melting pot, however, must give way to a mosaic.

As we approach the 21st century the survival of this country as a world leader and possibly the preservation of our planet requires a more moderate humanitarian approach to all people, working in harmony, and protecting each others human rights, culture, and traditions and protecting the environment.

Our founding fathers advocated freedom and justice for all and yet both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson owned slaves. The American West was conquered by killing and displacing the American Indians in truly barbaric ways and placing them on reservations which promote the concept of separate and not equal.

The "American Dream" has come true for European immigrants from Western Civilization who came to this country and assimilated into the American way of life by learning our language, culture, traditions, and largely giving up their previous language and culture. They became "Americans."

Such was and is not the case for people of color who reach this country in a variety of ways. Historically the Africans were brought here as slaves and the Chinese were brought here to do hard manual labor like build railroads and work in the mines. There is some difference between people who come here voluntarily rather than as prisoners. But even those who immigrate under extreme hardship with passionate reasons for fleeing are not able to transfer their passion automatically to their children who are born here or who immigrated at an early age. The parents may view conditions here as being much better but the children and youth can only compare what they have and how they are treated with the way anglo-Americans live.

Since the future is now and the demographics of American citizens is rapidly becoming more colorful, white Americans -- particularly educators -- and especially business and vocational educators, must recognize reality and prepare all our youth for workplace and life realities in understanding, compassionate, and empathetic ways. Cruelty, violence, or even denial must be diffused and neutralized or we face the prospect of wide spread violence and possibly civil war.

Ethnic gangs are already permeating our cities. People are hating and hurting each other just because they are different. The cycle must be stopped and reversed. This is obviously not an easy task but each of us needs to do our part to alter the indifference and denial by white Americans that a problem exists. We must bring diversity issues to the table and revisit seriously the notions of culture and cultural diversity and reconsider their impact on vocational education. We need to think hard and use powerful discourse about culture, multi-culturalism, anti-racist education and teaching strategies to arrive at a workable framework for vocational programs.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUSINESS & VOCATIONAL EDUCATORS

A research study summarizing the conclusions of more than 91 studies, reports, and papers of which schooling practices change the intercultural attitudes and behavior of teachers and students reveals that programs — whether they are called multicultural education or not — are unlikely to improve cross group relations if their treatment of cultural diversity is too brief or too superficial. (Cotton, K. Fostering Intercultural Harmony in Schools, Northwest Regional Educational Lab, Portland, OR 97204)

One-time activities produce little change. The mere presentation of facts rarely translates into change. Other ineffective practices include "message" films and plays, direct anti-prejudice lessons, or academic tracking.

What Does Work

In-depth, long term programs which are infused into the curriculum early and continued throughout high school help enhance relations among groups and help entry-level workers as well.

Cooperative learning stands above any other practice in improving intergroup relations. Kathleen Cotton writes:

Organizing learners into culturally heterogeneous teams, giving them tasks requiring group cooperation and interdependence, and structuring the activity so that the teams can experience success comprise an extremely powerful means of enhancing intergroup relations.

Critical thinking skills development is useful in breaking down prejudicial thinking. An emphasis on thinking critically about knowledge, life, and reality fosters intellectual curiosity, objectivity, openmindedness, and flexibility.

Self-esteem building activities which have been effective include teacher warmth and encouragement, opportunities to experience academic success, activities portraying people of one's cultural group or gender in a positive light, and having teachers and administrators of one's cultural group in the schools. Positive self-regard is strongly associated with the positive regard for those of other groups.

Employability skills can be taught. Recommendations for teachers include:

1. Reinforce to students that employers value basic, higher-order and affective employability skills more highly than job specific technical skills.

2. Arrange the classroom so that it replicates an actual work setting.
3. Demand good behavior in the classroom. Behavior should be consistent with workplace standards.
4. Incorporate work values into the classroom. Demand quality, thoroughness, and a positive attitude.
5. Monitor and support students' work as a consultant or facilitator providing them guidance and feedback.

("SERIES: Entry-Level Workers Are Lacking Skills," Northwest Report, NWRL, Portland, OR 97204)

Other Suggestions to Consider

1. Present the facts. Students will be working side-by-side with people of color.
2. World economics mandates that U.S. business and industry manufacture and market products and services which meet the needs of a wide variety of people from different countries and cultures.
3. Discuss and critically analyze NAFTA and other trade proposals and agreements. Examine them from different perspectives: who wins, who loses, what is the final score?
4. Encourage students to take a course in survival Spanish. Make it part of your curriculum. We cannot all learn multiple languages but we can learn basic communication in our second most prevalent language spoken in this country.
5. Study the culture, traditions, family structure, and religious beliefs of the people of color who are the most prevalent in your geographic area.
6. Form discussion groups where students can discuss their feelings and break down barriers.
7. Again, don't allow any racial, ethnic, or sexist jokes, slurs, or comments in your classes.
8. Insist students work together in teams. Rotate the teams frequently. Reward excellence and ideas. Encourage input from all students.
9. Smile, insist all students know and can pronounce the names of all other students. Call them by their name. If they choose to Americanize the name, fine, but don't you do it for them.

Good Luck and Get Going!